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U.S. says it won't take Soviet bait on missiles

By Jeremiah O'Leary
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SANTA BARBARA, Calif. — The White House said yesterday the United States will not halt NATO missile deployment despite Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's offer to halt deployment of medium range nuclear missiles.

A White House spokesman said the offer is an attempt to freeze intermediate missile arsenals at levels favorable to the Soviet Union.

Mr. Gorbachev has accepted the president's invitation to hold a superpower summit, the White House said, although the date and place are still to be determined.

One U.S. intelligence official said Mr. Gorbachev "has deployed virtually everything he has in the way of SS-20s, so I guess he's looking to pick up some media points. This guy is one smooth operator."

The Soviet offer was made on the day that House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, who has led bitter opposition to the president's defense initiatives, arrived in Moscow with a congressional touring group, and on the eve of a campaign of European protests against U.S. missile deployment. House Minority Leader Robert Michel, R-Ill., also was with the delegation, which hopes to meet Mr. Gorbachev.

Skepticism marked the first U.S. reaction. "At first blush," said White House spokesman Larry Speakes, the Gorbachev offer seems "to revive prior Soviet efforts to freeze in place with a previous Soviet



Reuters/UPI

Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev

advantage in INF [intermediate nuclear force] missiles.

"There is a 10-to-1 advantage in INF in their favor now," Mr. Speakes said, adding that "prior Soviet statements of intent to establish a moratorium have been followed by continued deployment.

"We believe the most pressing need is to achieve significant reductions in U.S.-Soviet offensive missiles, and this can be accomplished at Geneva," Mr. Speakes said in reference to the arms talks that began last month.

He said what Mr. Gorbachev had

proposed was no exchange for U.S. deployment in NATO countries of INF Pershing II and cruise missiles. "It will not interrupt our deployment," he said.

The White House said the Soviets are deploying INF missiles on a weekly basis. The Soviets reportedly have 415 of the three-warhead SS-20s deployed, some two-thirds of which are aimed at Western Europe.

According to American analysts, the Soviets have been making offers of moratoriums or freezes on weaponry since the 1960s when they have felt they were comfortably ahead of the United States in a given area.

The Soviet Union began building SS-20s during the Helsinki talks on disarmament and confidence building in 1975. They started deployment of the mobile missile in 1977. In 1979, NATO decided on a counter deployment.

Mr. Speakes said agreement to a summit meeting was contained in a letter to Mr. Reagan from Mr. Gorbachev. The spokesman said he did not believe the president has responded to the Soviet leader's reply.

There is speculation that the summit will occur in August or September, either in Helsinki or when the United Nations General Assembly reconvenes in New York.

Closer, Mr. Speakes said, "No, I don't think there's anything . . . that moves it any further than it was."

Mr. Reagan was briefed on the Soviet leader's remarks by Robert C. McFarlane, White House national

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security adviser. The president, who is vacationing at his ranch near Santa Barbara, Calif., did not comment.

Focusing on superpower relations in his first major statement since succeeding the late Konstantin U. Chernenko, Mr. Gorbachev said, "We are for an honest dialogue. We are prepared to demonstrate our good will again."

In saying the Soviets were placing a moratorium on deployment of SS-20 missiles until November, Mr. Gorbachev said that Moscow seeks "reciprocity," and what happens after that time is dependent on the West.

Mr. Gorbachev, named Communist Party general secretary March 11 after the death of Mr. Chernenko, said he was optimistic U.S.-Soviet relations can improve, but he said the Soviet Union expects "reciprocity."

Mr. Gorbachev specifically called for an end to NATO INF deployment, a freeze on strategic weaponry and

an end to research on space-based, anti-missile defenses that the Reagan administration says it is determined to pursue.

Mr. Speakes said his statement yesterday constituted the U.S. reply to the Soviet leader's overture, which was made in an interview in the Soviet Communist Party daily newspaper, Pravda, and distributed by Tass, the official news agency.

The Soviets had made a similar offer to cease deployment of INF missiles at Geneva within the past two weeks, sources said. Both sides

have promised not to repeat the substance of the arms talks.

"We are rejecting the Soviet offer, in the immediate sense, but at Geneva everything is on the table," Mr. Speakes told reporters. He said the INF proposal was not linked to the summit.

Mr. Gorbachev's statement was published two days before a scheduled visit to Moscow by the Netherlands Foreign Minister Hans van den Broek, who plans to discuss Dutch deployment of NATO missiles.

The Netherlands is the only one of the five NATO nations involved in the deployment that has not given final approval to placement of the new missiles, hinging its decision on Moscow's continued deployment of SS-20s.

The latest issue of "Soviet Military Power," a report released by the Defense Department in late March, suggests the Soviets are ending their SS-20 deployment to concentrate on deployment of a new intercontinental missile, the SS-X-25.

"Some shifting of the SS-20 force has recently been observed as the Soviets prepare for deployment of the SS-25; however no reduction of the SS-20 force is expected from this activity," the report said.

This observation has buttressed the suspicion among Western analysts that the Soviet announcement of the moratorium signaled Moscow was capping a deployment that Moscow already had completed.

The Soviets stopped deployment of the SS-20s during the U.S.-Soviet INF talks begun in Geneva in 1981 in an attempt to deter NATO in its counter deployment of 572 Pershing II and cruise missiles.

The Soviet Union resumed deployment of SS-20s after walking out of the INF talks in December 1983. They left the sessions as the United States began deployment of the new missiles in five European nations.

Another 36 missiles were added to the 378 that were operational globally when the Soviets left the bargaining table in 1983, said a State Department report released March 13.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko may discuss the summit further on May 15 when they attend the same meeting in Vienna to mark the anniversary of the Austrian treaty.

Michael Bonafield and wire accounts contributed to this report.